

Chapter One



Bee

Friday evening, December 1, 2023

Bethany is going to fire me.”
“She can’t fire you—you’re her sister. And her business partner.”

Bee Tyler took a sip of her Long Island iced tea and shook her head as her best friend and former classmate, Ayana Torres, continued to lay out the tarot cards between them. “Sisterly fidelity is not what holds together our business plan. Trust me,” Bee said, glaring at the three cards now spread out neatly on the table in front of her:

The devil. The fool. And death. How divine.

Ayana rolled her eyes and reached for the tiny tarot manual between them. It was meant to explain the deeper meaning behind each image, but Bee figured the cards spoke for themselves. From what she could tell, everything for the last twelve hours—hell, the last two *months*—had been nothing

less than trash. Why shouldn't the cards be ominous and depressing too?

"Beth is a little uptight, but she's not *unreasonable*," Ayana said, flipping her long locs over her shoulder before flipping through the pages. "She'll understand."

No, she won't, Bee thought. Her twin might not be unreasonable, but she wasn't stupid either. Bee had messed up. Badly. It would make sense for Beth to act accordingly, with absolutely no response to puppy dog eyes and appeals to their shared bloodline.

Aside from their irritatingly similar names, they had little else in common. Where Beth was a sharp edge, direct and to the point, Bee liked to think of herself as a gentle wave, easygoing and playful. After all, her job in their company, Appetite, was to charm the hearts and minds of their clients' customers. Beth built the app; Bee came up with the pretty designs and flowery words that made it appealing.

The only words that sprung to Bee's mind now, though, were *debt*, *bankruptcy*, and *failure*.

"Bee, come on," Ayana said, reaching across the table to tap Bee's now nearly empty glass. "It's one client."

"One client that was going to pay us half a million."

Ayana flinched and pulled her hand back. "Okay, yes. That's . . . a lot of money. But you have other clients, and you guys have been doing well for four years. This is your first major hiccup."

"Second. In two months."

Bee ignored Ayana's wide eyes and ordered another drink—a hot toddy this time, since they were sitting near the

front door and it was getting cold. Winter in San Francisco was always damp and chilly, and she was annoyed with herself that she hadn't thought to bring a thicker jacket to the bar. Instead, she'd been focusing on trying to look like she might have her shit together, donning designer jeans, a dark green blouse that accentuated her deep brown skin, and a thin leather jacket. She'd even worn sleigh bell earrings, to add a bit of whimsy. She needed to look not just presentable, but like she deserved to share a booth and drinks with the wildly accomplished woman sitting next to her. Ayana might be into hippie-dippie stuff like astrology and tarot cards, but she still ran one of the most successful companies in the country.

She and her wife, Toni, were the founders of Vacate, that super popular app where users swapped houses in presumably desirable locations. Bee had read features about it in *Essence*; *O, The Oprah Magazine*; and the *Wall Street Journal* in this month alone—and Ayana herself had made *Forbes's* 30 Under 30 three years ago.

In other words, Ayana was loaded. So loaded, in fact, that she'd just bought Toni a Tesla for Christmas. She'd told Bee about the surprise that morning over the phone, before Bee revealed she'd lost Appetite's latest contract. Ever the classy one, Ayana had shut up about the Tesla and kindly invited Bee out to drinks. She still showed up in a gorgeous white jumpsuit and black Jimmy Choos, though. The waitress assigned to their table had come over three times in the last twenty minutes, ostensibly as a show of good service, but Bee was willing to bet Toni's new Tesla that it was because the girl had yet to see Ayana's ring finger.

Ayana clapped her perfectly manicured hands together. “So, tell me: What happened to that first company?” Ah yes, the first harbinger of financial doom.

Bee sighed, tucking a stray twist behind her ear. “I don’t know.”

She did know. *That* company—a high-end clothing subscription app for rock-climbing bros—hated her writing. The creative director wanted grittier language, something that appealed to “rough-and-tumble Wall Street dudes” (his words) who wanted to blow off some steam instead of drinking whiskey at their desks after a hard day.

Ayana nodded along as Bee relayed the details, sipping her martini quietly. The tarot cards were still between them, the fool and the devil mocking Bee from the alcohol-soaked table while she studiously avoided looking at death. She really wasn’t eager to learn whatever the hell that card meant.

“Okay.” Ayana pushed her drink away and crossed her arms. “Well, that’s not your fault. Joe’s kind of an asshole.”

Bee tried not to roll her eyes. Of course, Ayana knew him. She knew everyone. The fact made Bee hesitant. She didn’t want Ayana to think less of her. They were friends, but they were also peers—in some circles, they could have even been rivals, the way some people liked to pit successful Black women against each other. Bee glanced around at their fellow bar patrons, some of whom she recognized and others she figured she’d meet eventually at some work function or another. Any one of these people could tear down her reputation if they overheard the wrong thing. Suddenly, her nerves flared, and anxiety bit back the truth

from her tongue. Maybe she shouldn't say anything. Maybe she should lie.

But she and Ayana had been close since college, even more so since Bee moved to San Francisco five years ago. And God, Bee needed to talk to someone. It's not like her sister would be keen to listen.

"What happened with Justin?" Ayana prodded, switching out one failed client for the next.

"Honestly?" Bee sucked in a breath and swallowed her pride. " I forgot."

Ayana blinked. "Forgot? Forgot what?"

"The deadline for the proposal I was supposed to send to them, about what the app would look like, what the copy would sound like, the research we'd do, et cetera. It was due a week ago." Bee sighed as she delivered the kicker. "Which was two weeks after the last deadline, before they gave an extension."

"Bee!"

Bee flinched and sank farther into her seat. "I know, I know. I just . . ." She shrugged. She really had no excuse. Deadline reminders were written everywhere in her apartment: the bulletin board next to the kitchen sink, the litany of sticky notes next to her bed, the cork board sitting above her desk. Beth had even texted her multiple times to remind her that her portion of the pitch was due.

But for some reason, she just couldn't bring herself to do it. Every time she opened the document, the technical words her twin had already written mocked her, daring her to attempt something witty or unique. She felt choked by

indecision, like every clever concept she'd ever thought of was a fluke and that the next words she typed were a herald of inevitable failure.

"Bee, you're not a failure," Ayana said upon hearing Bee's explanation, but Bee merely snorted and took another sip of her hot toddy. Ayana continued: "It also sounds like you didn't forget so much as you . . . maybe just didn't want to do it." She threw her hands up defensively. "I'm not accusing you of anything, I swear. I'm just saying . . ."

She opened her tarot book again and read through the cards' meanings, then placed her index finger on the last one—death. Great. "Okay, look. This one could mean a lot of things," she said. "But I'm sensing a pattern here with the first two, the fool and the devil. Since death came up last, I'm gonna say it means that something has to change. So"—she raised one hand and began ticking off each finger—"something *was* holding you back, you *are* primed for a new adventure, and something *is going to* or *has to* change."

"That doesn't suck to you?"

"Can I be real?" Ayana reached out and grabbed Bee's hand. The touch was unexpected—an intimate sort of kindness that Bee hadn't experienced in what felt like decades. Save for her ex, Roger, most of her interactions with people were in the form of an email, a text message, or an Instagram post. She straightened, suddenly feeling uncomfortable and overwhelmed. "Honestly, Bee," Ayana continued, "it sounds like you're burned out."

Tears sprang to Bee's eyes uninvited, but she blinked them

back quickly. No way. Absolutely not. She hadn't cried since college—not since that awful Christmas Eve six years ago when her parents demanded she do something “more with herself” than “waste away” writing poetry. Graduating from a liberal arts college with a degree in English was nice, they said, but useless—functionally without value. Not like the great and practical Bethany, whose degree in computer science from Stanford would yield a comfortable lifestyle they could brag to their friends about. Even now, they frequently referred to Beth as the brains behind Appetite. The architect.

Bee was just the one who made it “sound pretty.”

And now Christmas was coming up yet again, and soon she'd have to drive home to Albany, their parents' tiny but affluent neighborhood near Berkeley, and hear Beth explain to them how her pretty words—or lack thereof—had cost them two clients in fewer than sixty days.

Something clenched in her chest, but Bee fought it back. She flexed her hand, releasing it from Ayana's gentle grasp, and gritted her teeth in what she hoped looked like a smile as the waitress returned for the fourth time.

“Can I get anything else for you?” She smiled sweetly at Ayana.

“Yes,” Bee answered for her. “Another hot toddy. Please.”

The waitress glanced at her but didn't leave until Ayana responded with an “I'm good, thank you.” Once she walked away, Bee forced out a laugh.

“If she were my type, I'd be heartbroken.”

Ayana didn't take the bait. Instead, she pushed their

untouched shot glasses toward the middle of the table. She took one for herself and then gestured for Bee to take the other. Bee didn't have to be told twice; she knocked the tequila back quickly, welcoming the warmth that spread through her body. She shook her head and released a satisfied sigh. When she looked back at Ayana, though, her friend was already pulling out her phone and swiping quickly.

"Okay," Ayana said. "I've decided. You need a vacation."

"Uh, did you not hear the part where I just lost half a million dollars?"

Ayana shoved her phone into Bee's hands. "I did. Which is why I think you should try Vacate."

Her app? Ayana's solution to Bee's multiple crises was to *try her app*? She didn't know whether to be offended or to laugh. Bee's business was in the process of being run into the ground, and her supposed friend was shoving her hot multimillion-dollar company in her face. The gall was truly outrageous.

Bee started to sputter her indignation, mindlessly scrolling down the series of listings that Ayana had pulled up as she tried to collect her words. But as her brain registered the homes, her sputtering slowed. Ayana had input only two filters within the United States: *rural* and, amazingly, *cottage*. The results were all over the country, and they looked . . . inviting. Words like *charming*, *quiet*, and *countryside* jumped out at her like highway signs, and for a second, the muscles in her chest unclenched. She scrolled down the page, enchanted.

"Cool, right?" Ayana said, and Bee nodded numbly, distracted by the strange feeling swirling at the bottom of her

stomach. She felt a little nauseated, and at first she thought it was the lingering indignation, but as she scrolled, she realized it was another feeling entirely.

It felt like excitement.

"I'll leave you to it," Ayana said, putting the three tarot cards back into her deck and then straightening them all out so that they slid neatly into the box she'd brought them in. She placed the box next to the tarot manual on the table, then slid out of the booth. "I have to make a bathroom run."

Bee glanced up from her phone and studied the box and the manual. The fact that Ayana's company was rooted in travel and exploration made sense. Businesswoman or no, she was a wanderer at heart—someone who dreamed big and thought deeply about the world. A person with a big imagination.

Bee used to think of herself that way. Years ago.

She turned her attention back to Ayana's app. Her parents would be so disappointed in her if she skipped their annual Christmas Eve dinner. And for what? To gallivant on a whim to some town she'd never been to? It was frivolous. Wasteful. And Beth? She'd think Bee was being flaky as always. Irresponsible. Flighty.

But then again, they already thought those things, even when she was doing everything right.

Bee took a deep breath. Then she clicked the sign-up button.